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WPA Projects in Anaheim, CA, During the Great Depression

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Arthur Forbes Ames (1906-1975), Untitled, 1934 Oil on canvas, 92 x 56 in. Painted by Santa Ana artist Arthur Ames, this landscape was the central panel of a three-panel mural commissioned by the Works Progress Administration for the City of Anaheim and subsidized by the Public Works of Art Project. They were originally displayed in the old Carnegie library building. The artist described the mural as portraying truthfully the scenes about the city of Anaheim, the character of its people, and its normal life in 1934. This large center panel depicts citrus groves, oil wells, and a hydroelectric plant, with blue hills in the background. The solid wood frame was hand-carved. [All photo permission herein granted by the City of Anaheim.]

During the Great Depression, thousands of American cities, both urban and rural, faced the effects of the greatest economic crisis in American history. Lack of federal intervention during the Hoover administration left the nation in despair and desperate for aid. Once having adhered to Hoover's adage of "rugged individualism," distraught citizens now realized individualism could not provide the answers for the struggles they encountered. With the hope of government

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intervention, the nation voted unequivocally for the liberal counterpart who, although far from destitute himself, related to their needs and promised to intervene on their behalf. Franklin Delano Roosevelt emerged onto the scene with hope, optimism, and assurance that he would lead the nation out of the Depression.

Once elected, FDR organized a team of advisors to help him create within the first hundred days in office, the programs of the New Deal. One of the agencies, The Works Progress Administration (WPA), served as a catalyst for public works programs, specifically in the area of providing work to the unemployed. In cities all over the nation, the WPA provided grants that either paid employees directly or allocated funds to private firms. These programs were fundamental not only to the individuals they employed, but to the future of the cities themselves. Through the construction of public buildings, art projects, parks, and roads, American cities endured, remained intact, and even flourished as a result of the WPA.

One city in particular, Anaheim, California, received numerous grants to repair flood damage, build a new high school, and beautify the city through public art projects. Although Anaheim had found success through the agriculture of oranges prior to the Depression, WPA projects provided aid for the Great Flood of 1938, restored the high school after it had sustained earthquake damage, and funded several art projects. Beginning as early as 1934, in fact, plans began to unfold for two public art projects. The local newspapers referred to them as "gifts from [the WPA]," and provided regular updates on their anticipated arrival. Once funding could be secured through this public works of art project, Anaheim would proudly boast the construction of an industrial statue and a three-panel mural. Reports of when the art would be placed in the City Park and public library made headline news ("School Building, Program Buildings, and Works of Art (Public) Commercial Organizations" 1934, 27).

Within two months of first report, the plan came to fruition and the newspapers boasted of the colorful mural in the public library, which received the praise of local citizens. These headlines, and the fact that the articles contained great detail, indicate the measure to which these projects inspired Anaheim's citizens and created a renewed sense of pride in their depression-threatened city. Through newspaper coverage, the media could offer hope that the city would not only endure, but it may also return to a normalcy not seen since the onset of the economic crash ["School Building, Program Buildings, and Works of Art (Public) Commercial Organizations" 1934, 27].

Commissioned by well-known Anaheim art critic and composer Louis Danz, the mural displayed local life, perhaps in another attempt to symbolize normalcy. In fact, according to news reports, "[t]he painter, Santa Ana's Arthur Ames, stated that he made every effort to portray truthfully the scenes about this city, the character of its people, and its normal life. He studiously avoided the exodic (*sic*), preferring to make his painting harmonize with the room and its surroundings" ["School Building, Program Buildings, and Works of Art (Public) Commercial Organizations" 1934, 27]. Hung in the main lobby of the library, the art work not only caused considerably favorable comment, it represented hope in WPA funding, as is evidenced by the newspapers' acknowledgement that a grant was presented by the Public Works of Art Administration ["School Building, Program Buildings, and Works of Art (Public) Commercial Organizations" 1934, 27].

Anaheim's three-panel mural represented one of many New Deal public art pieces that, as Ames himself stated, truthfully portrayed normal life. This "Post Office art," as Morris Dickstein (2010) refers to it, featured cultural life of the thirties and provided national strength in turbulent times (xxii). But other works served a similar purpose. In addition to the mural, which still hangs

today in the Anaheim Library and Heritage Center, grants were provided for a statue of longtime resident Madame Helene Modjeska. Designed to honor her "colorful and brilliant career" by artist Maier-Krieg, and conceived once again by Louis Danz, newspapers credited the WPA for the funding which allowed "unemployed artists to build at federal cost" ["School Building, Program Buildings, and Works of Art (Public) Commercial Organizations" 1934, 27]. Local residents were kept informed of each step of the approval process while understanding where the money came from and to whom they should be grateful. In fact, a researcher would be hard pressed to find a single article that did not attribute government agencies for their generous contributions.

Full-length sculpture of Helena Modjeska, renowned Polish Shakespearean actress who came to live in Anaheim in 1876; sculpture is the oldest Public Works of Art project of its type in Orange County.

In addition to the public works art projects designed to beautify the city, the local high school was rebuilt through WPA funding. In 1935 the Anaheim Union High School yearbook, entitled the "Reconstruction Edition," contained a dedication to "The building of [their] new school," proclaiming this honored construction "will be accompanied by a growing realization of the responsibilities of good citizenship" (*The Colonist: Anaheim Union High School Yearbook 1935* 1935, np). Throughout the pages, it is evident how seriously the students took this responsibility. They realized the community would look to them to recognize the endowment of this gift, and they took an unusually mature approach at accepting it. With emotionally charged words, these young people exhibited remarkable wisdom at their challenge: "That we may all grow into complete maturity of thought and character, and so take our places as worthy citizens of a great democracy, is the aim of our education. To the achievement of this aim the 1935 Colonist is earnestly dedicated" (*The Colonist: Anaheim Union High School Yearbook 1935* 1935, np).

The following year, in 1936, the yearbook was named the "Building Edition" and contained details of what the students experienced during the building process: "Throughout the school year builders were at work. Slowly through the weeks our new school rose. Wood, steel, glass, and concrete, moulded (sic) and formed by trained artisans, gradually took the form of a splendid new earthquake-proof school that will stand for generations as a memorial to the builders of our high school district" (*The Colonist: Anaheim Union High School Yearbook 1936* 1936, np). In addition, the first several pages of the yearbook displayed photos taken throughout

the year with captions which read: "These pictures will remind us of scenes typical of the year 1935-36. The excavation showing the tops of the piles, the steel framework of the auditorium, the steel reinforcement for the concrete walls, the foundation of the stage, the concrete forms and the others were all familiar sights on the campus throughout the entire school year" (*The Colonist: Anaheim Union High School Yearbook 1936* 1936, np).

Anaheim Union High School. This last/current structure was built after the 1933 earthquake damaged the earlier buildings.

Both editions of the Anaheim Union High School yearbook serve as documentation to an historic event, one that lives on today through the Anaheim Alumni Association. Situated as a home base within the walls of the Heritage Center, Anaheim Public Library's historical archives, the Alumni Association also exists in human form as, on occasion, a visitor may encounter one of the members doing research among the vast collection of materials. Through personal contact, this researcher discovered the pride that still exists in the citizens who lived in Anaheim during the Great Depression, in those who endured the economic impact it had on their community, and in those who witnessed a rebirth of the city through WPA projects such as construction of the new high school. Talking to two members of the Alumni Association provided an understanding of what it must have been like to observe farmland become a town and then a city as projects to rebuild roads, create art, and construct public buildings defined the face of a new land.

Some of these city projects were documented in local newspapers and, like the statue and mural, represented Anaheim's pride of ownership. Beginning about 1937, local papers began reporting plans for various WPA projects. Included in the reports were the projects' estimated dates of completion, details of the city's approval process, and actual costs in dollar amounts. For example, one article from January 26, 1937, entitled "Two Anaheim Projects, Involving $28,517 Win Washington WPA Favor," provided a figure of $192,192 in allocations approved in Washington. The article unambiguously acknowledged the funding was intended for jobs that would "employ a total of 544 men" (Civic Activities, 26 January 1937). The reference to winning Washington WPA favor indicates the vulnerable state in which so many depression-wrought U.S. citizens found themselves. The frequency of these reports displays a nation in waiting as they relied so heavily on government funds and intervention. Subsequently, in Anaheim the frequency of these reports is evident. In the years 1937-1938 alone, weekly—if not daily—articles appeared in local papers. Frequent topics included the announcement of another request for funding, the proclamation of an approval, and the progress of the projects. Moreover, the articles frequently recorded exactly how many men were employed by the WPA. One newspaper stated that "for Anaheim grammar school repairs, $1,885, and Anaheim water main extension, $26,682," "[e]ight men will be required on the school job and 37 men on the water main work" (Civic Activities, 28 January 1937). On February 3, 1937, the local papers excitedly

announced "Tree Surgery is New WPA Project." The article described that "tree surgery work in Anaheim this year will mean an expenditure of $7,619, giving work to 35 men for three months providing the WPA application is approved" (Civic Activities, 3 February 1937). Another announced "thirty-four workers will be at work for the next three months pruning trees, cleaning the tree basins and moving dead trees for new plantings" (Civic Activities, 23 September 1937). News of employment spread throughout the city, bringing hope of a recovering economy. The news represented that for each amount provided by the WPA, men were put to work and unemployment rates would begin to drop.

One particular project proposed not only short-term employment, but also steady work for six men for a period of one year. If the plan was approved, the men would have each been paid $77 per month through the "formation of a geology class to locate and classify fossils and minerals of Orange [C]ounty" (Civic Activities, 17 February 1937). Atypical of most WPA projects in Anaheim, which focused more on the direct improvement of public streets, this class required the approval of county supervisors, and its completion was unconfirmed in any future newspaper reports. Comparatively, an appropriation for the City Park was increased from $23,000 to $25,000 the same year. Although the project was put on hold for a year while approval was pending, it eventually came to fruition, and the city received a new park. Newspapers confirmed the completion of several other projects during the years of 1937-1938, including three that represented $14,547 in valuation and provided work for 122 men (Civic Activities, 12 February 1937). The article demonstrated pride in the city, stating, "approximately 25 cocos plumosos palms will be planted in place of the dead trees being removed and on streets not now beautified." And once again, the WPA is credited for "providing $6,832 […] towards the $8,436 project" (Civic Activities, 12 February 1937).

However impressive each WPA project was, the most extraordinary of them are scrapbooks of local newspapers created to document the city's experiences. Serving as an historical account of how Anaheim was affected economically by the Great Depression, the scrapbooks represent ingenuity, creativity, and resourcefulness. Housed today in the Anaheim Public Library's Heritage Center, the bound books allow a walk through Anaheim during the years of 1935 to 1939. A researcher need only open the pages and read in order to understand the events that unfolded during that time. Organized by either Civic Activities or Buildings and Works of Art, the scrapbooks contain the most prevalent information for anyone seeking knowledge on the subject. Furthermore, the fact that the books highlight the city's WPA projects, while being a WPA project itself, represents an exceptional piece of evidence. Spending any amount of time sifting through the pages of these scrapbooks creates not only a vision of what occurred in the city, but of the men and women who painstakingly examined the local papers, clipped and pasted them onto the pages, and left a legacy for future residents to behold.

With amazing foresight these local researchers chose to include in the books what they thought to be the most significant occurrences in the city. Without some of these articles, Americans may never have completely understood the attitudes local citizens had toward WPA projects. For example, one such article leaves no doubt about the magnitude of hope Anaheim residents placed in the government: "Brighter hopes than ever before loomed for the three WPA projects submitted by the city several months ago when a communication was received from Washington yesterday afternoon regarding all three" (Civic Activities, 25 March 1937). Clearly, Anaheim residents awaited news of approval since it represented the positive impact these projects would have on their city. The City Engineer himself kept the line of communication open by assuring the readers, "This means the projects are being considered by the final WPA

authorities to approve them, we should be given word to start by the middle of April if they are approved" (Civic Activities, 25 March 1937). The article included detailed information on the cost of the projects, and specific locations where the work would be conducted: "The $10,925 project to complete Santa Ana [S]treet paving and curb work between Lemon and Citron [S]treets, of which WPA is expected to pay $4,458 for labor; and the tree surgery project for $7,619 of which WPA pays $6,812 for labor" (Civic Activities, 25 March 1937).

Anticipation mounted as residents and authorities both awaited government approval not only to improve their city but to repair it. After the great flood of 1938, 200 men were shifted from other WPA projects to special projects for clean-up work after the flood. An article entitled "WPA Answers Pleas for Help Cleaning of Anaheim Streets" describes the priority placed on repairing flood damage to other projects (Civic Activities, 9 March 1938). Another describes it in great detail:

> Employment for Nearly 100 Men Promised on Street Repair Projects: Between 75 and 100 men will be given work on Anaheim's streets, repairing damage caused by the March 3 flood, according to J.F. Johnson, WPA zone engineer, who was in Anaheim yesterday. The work will continue for a period of nearly three months and will cost $46,874 for labor and $3592 for material. (Civic Activities, 2 April 1938)

The zone engineer went on to assure readers that "When this work all gets under way there should be no labor surplus in Orange [C]ounty" (Civic Activities, 2 April 1938). Vulnerability to government aid is evident as the chronological scrapbooks display. Attitudes toward the projects represent gratitude and hopefulness as the residents slowly witnessed their city changing for the better.

Just as the scrapbooks represent a heritage of depression-wrought years, so the public works of art remain a legacy to behold. The mural, originally housed in the Carnegie Building, still hangs in Anaheim; its central panel is in the Heritage Center of Anaheim Public Library on Anaheim Boulevard, and its two outer panels are in the lobby of the Anaheim Public Library on West Broadway. With a caption reading "originally commissioned by the Works Progress Administration for the City of Anaheim and subsidized by the Public Works of Art Project," credit continues to be paid to the WPA. Although once left to "languish in [the] basement of [the] city library," the mural is once again proudly displayed for all to see (Worner 2009, np). In addition, the statue of Madame Helene Modjeska remains standing on the corner of Lemon and Sycamore where it was originally placed, as well as Anaheim Union High School, the fire station, and several other public buildings.

As Jason Scott Smith (2006) argues in his book *Building New Deal Liberalism,* the New Deal transformed the American economy, political system, and physical landscape (258). Anaheim represents a city whose landscape was dramatically changed as it continues to boast the projects funded by the WPA. Furthermore, the public works represent an uprising of community morale, increase in employment, and now, a legacy to the small rural town that flourished under one of the gravest periods in American history. Thanks to the WPA's generosity, verified by the remarkable amount of evidence that exists in the archives, Anaheim not only survived the Great Depression, it developed into the booming modern American city it is today.

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